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BRISTOL RECORD SOCIETY, UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL
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The purpose of this paper is to explore an element in the political life of Bristol in the nineteenth century which was certainly never dominant but which was rarely totally absent and which was at times more appealing than might be expected. It is true that throughout the century no Radical represented the city in parliament, although in 1895 the Christian Socialist vicar of St. John's Arch, the Rev. H.H. Gore, came within a few hundred votes of winning the East Bristol seat at a bye-election.¹ Moreover, from the beginning of annual elections for the city council in 1835 until the end of the century the Conservatives always commanded a majority, and Radical councillors were few and far between among the opposition. Radicalism was much more in evidence in London, the Midlands and north of the Trent than it was in Bristol. Radicals were apt to regard Bristol as 'a dark, benighted spot', as the ultra-radical paper *The Destructive* put it in 1833.²

Nevertheless, the city was not quite such stony ground for Radicals as this suggests. It was in Bristol that the notorious Radical Henry Hunt early in the century pioneered the use of the mass platform as an agitational device to attack the establishment of his day. The city was the scene in 1840 of the beginning of the then outrageously Radical 'atheist mission' to England, and it was among the earliest centres in the country to have an organised Socialist body. There was scarcely an anti-establishment cause or dissident religious sect, however visionary or extreme, which did not have adherents in Bristol. In the first half of the century, for instance, Bristol had its *Zetetics*,³ *Southcottians*,⁴ Irvingites⁵, Owenites⁶, Bible Christians, Primitive Methodists,

¹ F.W.S. Craig ed. *British parliamentary election results, 1835-1918*, p. 84: Sir W.H. Wills Bt. 3,740 H.H. Gore Independent Labour 3,558. Gore captured 48.8% of the votes cast.

² *The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative* 7 September 1833. Hetherington, the paper's printer and publisher, visited Bristol and spoke, he claimed, to 5,000 gathered on Brandon Hill to protest against the £20 million to be paid to slave-owners in compensation for slave emancipation.

³ For Richard Carlile's Zetetic following in Bristol, see, for example, his *Lion* 4 January 1828. The *Carlile MSS* in the Huntingdon Library, San Marino, California refers to a Mr. Cossens of Bristol as the major distributor of his publications in Bristol in 1826.

⁴ For a recent reference to the Rev. S. Eyre and his Bristol followers of Joanna Southcott, the prophetess, see J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming, popular millenarianism, 1780-1850*, (1980), pp. 110 and 248 (footnote).

⁵ *Bristol Mercury* 28 October 1837 reported that the Irvingites had bought a piece of ground near the Stone Bridge for the erection of a church: '... we learn that the building will be a very superb one ... the Irvingites being already an exceedingly wealthy people.' Following their decline this church was bought by the Catholics and solemnly dedicated by Bishop Barnes as St. Mary's on the Quay.

⁶ The history of Bristol Owenism can be traced in *The New Moral World* and *The Reasoner*.

Brethren, Unitarians, Rechabites, Friends⁷, members of the National Union of the Working Classes, Chartists, Fraternal Democrats⁸, adherents of the National Association for the Protection of Labour⁹ and, briefly, even an Irish Confederate Club which met near Old Market in 1848¹⁰ Tories, in the first half of the century especially, certainly believed there was a dangerous undercurrent of Radical sentiment in the city. One pamphleteer in 1807 denounced what he called 'the Bristol school of revolutionary dogma';¹¹ the well known antiquarian, the Rev. Samuel Seyer, analysing the parties in the city in 1820, referred to 'the Radicals, that is the Mob and their Leaders whose sole object is Revolution and plunder'¹², and probably the most widely circulated attempt to account for the famous riots of 1831 ascribed them to a conspiracy engineered by Radicals and the press.¹³

Why should there have been this undercurrent of Radical protest in nineteenth century Bristol? What kind of Radical change did its protagonists seek? Did they make *any* impact? Answers to these questions can only be found if we focus in some detail on particular epochs during the century. The first of these which demands attention is that of the Radical revival which followed the virtual crushing of Radicalism in the 1790s by William Pitt.

The beginnings of this Radical revival can be seen in Bristol in 1804 as a consequence of Sir Francis Burdett's unavailing attempt to win a seat in

⁷ In order of number of places of worship, the Religious Census of 1851 recorded for the municipal borough: Church of England (42); Independents or Congregationalists (19); Wesleyan Methodists (12); Wesleyan Reformers (10); Particular Baptists (9); Primitive Methodists (2); Unitarians (2); Friends (1); Moravians (1); Bible Christians (1); Calvinistic Methodists (1); Brethren (1) and Baptists (undefined) (1). *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal* 29 January 1842 provides information on the Rechabites.

⁸ *Northern Star* 5 February 1848 records a Mr. Rogers of Bristol, described as 'an old member' of the Fraternal Democrats, Julian Harney's London-based club of continental political exiles and British Chartists.

⁹ See, for example, *Northern Star* 31 March 1844 for the *Address of the United Trades Association of Bristol to their fellow workmen of the different trades in the United Kingdom*. It was signed among others by Samuel Jacobs who has recently been the subject of some controversy (see *Bulletin of the Society for Labour History*, No. 37, (1978), pp. 51-67; no. 38 (1979), pp. 19-20).

¹⁰ *Northern Star* 10 January 1848. It was called The *Erin ga Bragh* Confederate Club and met at Rebbeck's Coffee and Reading Rooms, 1 Tower Hill, Old Market.

¹¹ Anon, *The First Six Letters of Centinel* (Bristol, 1807). The British library copy has a superscription in manuscript 'By the apostate named Agg?' John Agg, if he was the author, which seems plausible, was also the author of pamphlet attacks on the Radical Thomas Lee (see J. Agg, *The Lamp Trimmed* (Bristol, 1807) whom the *Letters of Centinel* bracket with Hunt as a revolutionary. They are accused of establishing 'Bristol's Committee of Public Safety' because they had organised a dinner at the Trout Inn, Stokes Croft to celebrate Burdett's victorious return to parliament for the popular constituency of Westminster in 1807.

¹² Rev. S. Seyer's *Calendar of Events in Bristol, 1820-1827*, p. 29. (MS 4529 Bristol Central Library).

¹³ Rev. J. Eagles, *Bristol Riots, their causes, progress and consequences* (Bristol, 1832). For an analysis of and refutation of this, see A.P. Hart, *The Bristol riots and the mass media* (unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford 1979).

parliament at a bye-election for Middlesex. Sir Francis was then the chief, even the sole, national standard-bearer of Radicalism.¹⁴ One of his supporters, the Rev. Dr. Walter Honeywood Yate of Hucclecote near Gloucester, a J.P. and Deputy Lieutenant of the county, came to Bristol in 1804 and succeeded in gathering an audience to hear him call on Bristolians to raise funds to support Burdett.¹⁵ One of those who was prepared to help collect cash was Jacob Sturge, land surveyor, of the well known Quaker family.¹⁶

The Rev. Dr. Yate almost certainly met with little success. It was scarcely an auspicious time for Radicalism. The renewal of the war with Napoleon and the threat of invasion meant that loyalty to Church, King and country was the order of the day. The Bristol press was filled with reports of parades of the city's Volunteer Infantry, Rifle Corps and Cavalry. 'All the churches and chapels were never better attended than on Good Friday 1804', one paper reported.¹⁷ The local establishment appeared to have everything settled to its satisfaction. For instance, the Whig and Tory interests, to avoid the very expensive parliamentary elections of the 1780s, had agreed to share the representation of the city. So at the elections in 1790, 1796 and 1802 their nominees were returned without a contest or after a token fight.¹⁸ The candidates were chosen by small cliques of wealthy merchants, bankers and lawyers, members of either the Tory Steadfast Society or the Whig Independent and Constitutional Club, who met at the White Lion and Talbot Taverns respectively. The surviving minutes of the Tory club show this comfortable process in action in 1806:

17 members of its committee met and pledged themselves to find £2000 to secure their candidate's election, and the machinery of parish canvassing was got ready just in case what it called 'the peace of the city' was disturbed,¹⁹ that is by a third candidate standing and forcing an election.

¹⁴ For a valuable assessment of Burdett's role, see J.R. Dinwiddy, 'Sir Francis Burdett and Burdettite Radicalism' in *History*, Vol. 65, (1980) pp. 17-31.

¹⁵ For Yate's speech in Bristol, see W.H. Yate, *A series of Letters containing free and candid Remarks on many interesting, important National Subjects*, (Gloucester, 1806) pp. 105-112; for his appointment as Deputy Lieutenant, see *Bristol Gazette* 12 April 1804, and for his support of Burdett in 1804, see W.H. Yate, *A serious and impartial Address to all the Independent Electors of the United Kingdom upon the recent Middlesex Election* (Gloucester, 1804), and advertisements in *Bristol Gazette* 23 August, 6 September 1804.

¹⁶ For Jacob Sturge, see E. Sturge, *Reminiscences of my Life* (Bristol, 1928, privately printed), pp. 170-1 and *Bristol Gazette* 16 September 1804.

¹⁷ *Bristol Gazette* 5 April 1804.

¹⁸ Only in 1796 was there a semblance of a contest when Benjamin Hobhouse stood as a third candidate.

¹⁹ *White Lion Club Minutes and proceedings*, ff. 3-6, MS 12144, Bristol Record Office. The minutes clearly record the collusion of the two clubs.

It was precisely against this electoral manipulation by the collusive Whig and Tory oligarchies that Radical protest was chiefly directed in the first decade of the nineteenth century. It had reduced Bristol to a level with 'the rottenest of rotten boroughs', to quote one of the resolutions adopted at the foundation meeting of Henry Hunt's Bristol Patriotic and Constitutional Association in 1807.²⁰ Radicals such as Yate or Hunt, in the days when he still followed Burdett, demanded an end to the intimidation and corruption of the electorate by the clubs, so that the rights of the freeborn Englishmen to choose their representatives freely might be restored. To achieve this locally meant forcing an election by having a third candidate genuinely independent of the clubs and pledged to accepting neither office nor public money. It was this role that the Wiltshire gentleman-farmer, Henry Hunt who, before he became a national figure from 1816 onwards was usually known as 'Bristol Hunt', played in the exceedingly stormy bye-election of 1812 and repeated at the general election in the same year. Hunt knew perfectly well that given the wealth and power of the clubs, even though in 1812 the Whigs happened to be split, he had no chance of being returned. But if he could keep the polls open for the customary fifteen days he would force the clubs to use their machinery of corruption and, so he hoped, by sheer exposure the system would be discredited and parliament itself would be forced to intervene. Keeping the polls open for fifteen days entailed having several hundred of Bristol's electorate of 5-6,000 prepared to vote for him in packets of a score or so per day which at once raised the question of who supported gentlemen Radicals — those men on white horses wearing white top hats, for these symbols of purity were a commonly-used Radical ploy. Analysis of those who voted for Hunt in 1812 shows that the overwhelming majority were artisans or humbler folk from the poor parishes in the city.²¹ Indeed, a characteristic which runs throughout the history of early nineteenth century Radicalism in Bristol is that it was fuelled by the discontents of the lower orders, but led and articulated by men of some wealth or education.

Radical protest also was not confined to challenging the clubs' control of parliamentary elections, as may be seen from the pamphlets of the radical Thomas Lee, surgeon and apothecary of 24 St Augustine's Back²², or from

²⁰ *Memoirs of Henry Hunt, Esq. written by himself*, (1821), ii. 275-6.

²¹ No modern study of the 1812 elections has been published, but extensive materials exist which, in addition to the local press, include *The Times* which reported the bye-election in some detail in its issues 30 June to 9 July 1812 and noticed the contest at the general election on 10-21 October. Both Hunt and Romilly's *Memoirs* cover the elections *in extenso*. See also pamphlets by C.H. Walker, *Accounts* of both Hunt and Romilly's reception in Bristol, placards in the Jeffries collection, Vol. 10 in the Bristol Central Library and *The Bristol Poll Book, 1812* (Bristol, 1818) as well as minor ephemera.

²² Thomas Lee, according to his opponent John Agg, was not a Bristolian. He appears in Matthew's *Complete Bristol Directory* under the above description from 1803 onwards.

Hunt's innumerable speeches in Bristol which won him the title in 1812 of 'Orator' Hunt. Both combined protest against specific local and national targets with the message that contemporary society was essentially rotten and in need of radical overhaul. Thomas Lee, for instance, accused the Tories in 1807 of obscuring the major local issue of the new dock bill by plastering the city with no popery posters on the eve of the parliamentary election of that year. He lambasted the great Alderman Thomas Daniel and his Tory friends of the Dock Company for promoting a dock bill which proposed to levy port dues for the first time on coastal shipping and on certain hitherto exempt imported foodstuffs. The bill, incidentally, was occasioned by a problem with an unhappy contemporary ring — the heavy cost incurred in making the Floating Harbour. In Thomas Lee's eyes, however, it would simply benefit the Dock Company at the expense of the poor.²³ In the same year he publicly challenged the Mayor and Council on a national question when they sought to congratulate George III for dismissing the Grenville ministry for its modestly liberal proposal that Roman Catholics might be allowed to become officers' in the armed services. Lee maintained — not without some plausibility — that the King had unwisely listened to secret and evil advice and in so acting had shaken the constitution to the core.²⁴ There was nothing very radical in all this, however much he angered the Tory establishment: the dock bill was unpopular in some highly respectable quarters²⁵, and aristocratic Whigs also disapproved of Grenville's dismissal. What made Lee a true Radical was his firm defence of the worth and rights of artisans, and his questioning of the nature of his society. Three quotations from his pamphlets of 1807 must suffice as illustration. 'It is infamous', he wrote, 'that power and property should be allowed, as they are allowed, to combine against labour, and that labour should not be allowed to combine against power and property.'²⁶ That was to defend the right of artisans to form trade societies and question the recently enacted prohibition of 'combinations.' Or again he declared 'every journeyman who has suffered for the sake of bettering the condition of his fellow craftsman deserves to be canonized as a martyr to the rights of the most useful classes of mankind.'²⁷ And lastly, he inquired, 'why are the human beings of this country . . . to be put in one scale while jobbing . . . place hunting, coal dealing, barrack

²³ Thomas Lee, *White Lion Club, late riot and dock tax*, (Bristol, 1807).

²⁴ Anon, *The First Six Letters of Centinel* attacked Lee at length for unavailingly moving an amendment to the City's address to the above effect.

²⁵ R.A. Buchanan, 'The construction of the Floating Harbour in Bristol, 1804-09,' in *Trans. B & G Archaeological Society*, LXXXVIII, (1969), pp. 190-200, for such opposition.

²⁶ T. Lee, *Trim the Lamp*, (Bristol, 1807), pp. 12-13.

²⁷ T. Lee, *The Looking Glass of the Workmen of the United Kingdom into which Masters and the Public will do well to take a Peep*, (Bristol, 1807), p. 12.

building, canalling, docking, paving, speculation, Melvillism, corruption, warfare, banking, paper credit, lying, intolerance, priestcraft . . . are placed on the other scale, making the happiness, rights and privileges of England kick the beam?²⁸

It was Hunt not Lee, however, who became the central figure in Bristol Radicalism in the second decade of the century.²⁹ Hunt with his tall, imposing figure which made him such a favourite with the ladies developed a near-genius capacity for raising the temperature wherever he went by inexhaustible provocative speechifying. He was no systematic thinker, no organizer, but a Regency gentleman-pugilist who quixotically set himself up to fight the corner of working folk against the oppressions of the rich and powerful. To cite one example which, I hope, captures his style at its most provoking: in 1812 when Luddism flourished, Napoleon remained unbeaten, war with the U.S.A. was imminent and economic collapse was a very real danger,³⁰ Hunt addressed Bristolians thus:

You have heard of a large Army of 20,000 marching into the north of England, and for what forsooth? to subdue Buonaparte? To drive the French Marshals out of Spain? No, I say no, gentlemen, but to subdue your own starving Countrymen. The next official news will probably bring us an account of a great Victory obtained by our Armies over the Workmen, or at least over those who used to work, in the potteries in Staffordshire, the reduction of the weavers at Manchester, the routing of the nail makers at Sheffield, the capture of the Lace-makers at Nottingham. Thus are we approaching to a military despotism; we have been at War against Liberty for the last twenty years which appears likely to end in a civil war at home.³¹

Expert as Hunt was at raising a commotion, his endeavours in the end were fruitless. As he expected, he did not get elected in the two elections of 1812, only polling 235 and 523 votes. And although he succeeded in having a Select Committee of the House of Commons investigate the Bristol election, in spite of much evidence to the contrary it did not find impropriety had been committed.³²

However, Hunt's fruitless endeavours in Bristol did play a significant part in bringing about a change in his Radicalism which became a matter of

²⁸ T. Lee, *Trim the Lamp*, p. 8.

²⁹ For a while they were allies, but in 1808 engaged in a sordid and undignified quarrel frequently conducted in abusive terms in the Bristol press.

³⁰ See A.D. Harvey, *Britain in the early nineteenth century*, (1978), chap. 8 for a useful synopsis.

³¹ *Bristol Election: an account of Mr. Hunt's Public Reception in Bristol*, May 18 1812 (Bristol, 1812).

³² *An authentic Report of the Evidence and Proceedings before the Committee of the Hon. House of Commons appointed to try the merits of the Bristol Election of October 1812.*

national importance when he alone of the leading Radicals of the day agreed to address the Spa Fields meetings in London in 1816-17. Hunt's Bristol experience led him to believe that a truly radical overhaul of the electoral system was needed. It was no use campaigning in eighteenth century reforming style for the rights of existing voters. Nothing short of giving everyone the vote would do. And if this was so, then one had to address not simply the freemen and freeholders of Bristol, who had the vote, but everyone.³³ And that meant using a meeting place where they could all gather to hear you, and so we find Hunt making much use of Brandon Hill which in the nineteenth century was to be *the* gathering place for Radical demonstrations. The most striking example of Hunt's use of it was on Boxing day 1816. The Mayor had refused his request to call a public meeting to consider petitioning parliament for electoral reform. So Hunt resorted to Brandon Hill with the soldiery in attendance lest riot should ensue. There, a petition, said to have been signed by 15,700 people, was adopted calling for Hunt's truly radical programme of universal suffrage. It was couched in notably ferocious language denouncing the House of Commons as 'no more than the tool of an ever-grasping and tyrannical oligarchy of borough mongers.' And it was this Bristol petition that was selected to launch the parliamentary bombardment early in 1817 which was intended as the climax of the prodigious nationwide petitioning movement of 1816-17 for parliamentary reform in which 350 towns participated.³⁴

It was to no avail. After this Hunt left Bristol for the more promising pastures of London and Manchester. No doubt he left behind disciples of his ultra-Radicalism. Mr. Cossens, for example, who moved the vote of thanks to Hunt on Brandon Hill on Boxing day 1816 was found ten years later as chief distributor in Bristol of Richard Carlile's *Republican*, with its message of 'down with kings, priests and lords'.³⁵ But essentially with Hunt's departure the Radical cause appears to have been sustained, and then only in a diminishing way, by more moderate reformers. Of these, C.H. Walker, an active pamphleteer and attorney, may be regarded as typical. Hunt was too much of a demagogue for him. He had supported the liberal-minded Whig, Sir Samuel Romilly, when he had contested Bristol in rivalry with Hunt in 1812.³⁶ Nonetheless, Charles Walker was certainly a Radical. He was bitterly

³³ J.C. Belchem, 'Henry Hunt and the evolution of the mass platform', *English Historical Review*, 1978, pp. 739-749.

³⁴ Accounts of the meetings are to be found in *Bristol Gazette*, 2 January 1817, and *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 28 December 1816; *Parl. Debs.* 1st ser. xxxv (29 January 1817) 78-99; J. Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform 1640-1832* (1972), pp. 170-2 for the petitioning movement.

³⁵ *Carlile MSS*, Huntingdon Library, Carlile to Holmes, 4 August 1826.

³⁶ Charles Houlden Walker, *An Independent Address to the Electors of Bristol* (Bristol, 1812); *An Address to the electors of the United Kingdom* (Bristol, 1812).

hostile to the Tories, whom he detested for having filled the gaols and work-houses of Regency England, and to orthodox Whigs, whom he dismissed as office-seekers rather than reformers. His key desire was to see Bristol represented by 'two efficient members' pledged to reform parliament, extend the franchise, put down Rotten Boroughs, repeal the Septennial Act, give Dissenters and Catholics full civil rights, end negro slavery in the British colonies, and reform the legal system. His hopes were doomed to disappointment. In the sharply-contested 1818 election he was driven to working for Hugh Baillie, largely in an effort to keep out the sitting member Edward Prothrope, a Whig whose parliamentary record showed he was undistinguishable from a Tory ministerialist, even though Baillie was very far from satisfactorily pledged. And in 1820, having denounced Henry Bright, the only Whig candidate on this occasion, as unfit to represent the city since he would not pledge himself to support parliamentary reform and Catholic Emancipation, Walker and his friends were driven to the desperate but legal course of nominating a candidate from the Baillie family without his consent. Not surprisingly, after two days polling the unwilling Radical nominee had attracted a mere 120 votes, while his Whig and Tory opponents piled up over 2000 each.³⁷ No wonder the Radicals withdrew to lick their wounds.

In the twenties their cause was at a low ebb. However, there was evidence of mounting criticism of the Tory clique which dominated the Corporation and Dock company. The founding of the Chamber of Commerce in 1823 was the work of a group highly critical of the way the port was being run. In 1826 there was an abortive effort by a body of citizens to get a High Court ruling that all the burgesses were entitled to elect the Common Council rather than it being self-perpetuating.³⁸ In May 1827 James Acland, a restlessly-active London journalist of Radical disposition, settled in Bristol and ambitiously attempted to launch the first daily newspaper in the west country, *The Bristolian*. Undercutting the advertising rates of the existing weekly papers, conducting a lively letter column and breaking the law by publishing at 1½d without paying the 4d newspaper stamp tax, Acland's paper was a muck-raking popular Radical affair. It concentrated on exposing abuses in the Corporation and the Courts, spicing this with demands for an overhaul of the national political system. Eventually Acland wound up in prison in 1829 but not before he had made his contribution to

³⁷ Charles Houlden Walker, *An Address to the Honest and Conscientious Electors of Bristol on the recent election for that city and the failure of the Petition against the Sheriff's return* (Bristol, 1819); *A Second Address . . .* (Bristol, 1819); *A Third Address . . . ; Address to the Electors of Bristol showing the ineligibility of H. Bright to represent them*, (Bristol, 1820). For the complexities of the 1818 and 1820 elections, see Jeanie Williams, 'Bristol in the General Elections of 1818 and 1820', in *Trans. B & G Archaeological Society*, LXXVII (1968), pp. 173-201.

³⁸ Rev. S. Seyer's *Calendar of Events in Bristol, 1820-1827* (MSS 4529, Bristol Central Library).

the growing unpopularity of the establishment, particularly the unreformed Corporation.³⁹

By this time, amidst acute economic distress,⁴⁰ an era of immense turmoil in Bristol's life had begun and it was not destined to end until the Free Port Campaign reached its triumphant conclusion with the Corporation's take-over of the docks in 1848. The pros and cons of parliamentary reform, corporation reform, the abolition of slavery, the rights of Catholics and those of the working classes and the question of how to stimulate the sluggish economic life of the city sharply divided Bristolians. Furthermore, it was a time of squalor and tumult. Cholera claimed many victims in 1831 and 1849; the mortality rate was exceeded only by that of Manchester and Liverpool, and the ferocity of the Bristolian when roused was demonstrated in the famous riots of 1831. Throughout this era a powerful phalanx of Clifton-based Tories opposed change, while much more heterogeneous forces campaigned for it. Among these were Radicals of varied persuasions.

One new development was the emergence of independent working class radical organizations and working class leaders. Half a dozen lines in issue no. 28 for 24 December 1831 of Henry Hetherington's celebrated unstamped, illegal periodical, *The Poor Man's Guardian*, record the first occasion when Bristol working folk got together on their own to form a radical political organization:

A meeting of the working class was held on Monday, Dec. 12 for the purpose of considering the utility of forming a Union to be called the National Union of the Working Classes of Bristol, when it was unanimously resolved that a Union be formed for the purpose of supporting the principles of Universal Suffrage, Annual Parliaments and Vote by Ballot. The rules of the London Union of the Working Classes was read and adopted.⁴¹

This example of independent working class activity was to be followed most notably in the Chartist campaign in the city.⁴² From 1837, when a Bristol Working Man's Association was established, until 1852, when the Bristol Chartists disappeared from view, artisans and small shopkeepers tried to turn Bristol into 'one of the most glorious radical cities in the

³⁹ For Acland and *The Bristolian*, see A.P. Hart, 'The Bristol Riots and the mass media', Oxford D. Phil. 1979, pp. 148 ff.

⁴⁰ *The Chronicle of Bristol*, September 1829, referred to the 'unexampled state of distress among the middle and lower classes . . . examine every shop: scarcely a customer to be seen . . . ask the wholesale dealers: they will tell you they have more bills returned now than they had even during the late panic'.

⁴¹ *Poor Man's Guardian*, 24 December 1831.

⁴² For Bristol Chartism, see J. Cannon, *The Chartists in Bristol* (Bristol, 1964). David McNulty is preparing a thesis on west-country Chartism which should add to our knowledge of Bristol Chartism.

nation', to quote the declared aim of the Bristol Chartists' favourite orator in the late thirties, Henry Vincent. There was not a great deal of difference in programme, tactics or symbols displayed between Hunt's earlier campaign and the Chartists. Indeed, Henry Vincent began his speech at the first public meeting organized by the Bristol Working Men's Association held in Queen Square in October 1837 by reminding his audience of the sound political principles Hunt had preached in the city. The meeting also ended by adopting the three points of Hunt's Radical reform programme of the eighteen-twenties, that is, the vote for everyone, annual parliaments and the secret ballot, only adding the distinctive contribution of the National Union of the Working Classes that no property qualification should be required in order to become an M.P.⁴³ Furthermore, surely looking back to Hunt's 1816 meeting, their meeting to adopt their delegates for the forthcoming Chartist National Convention in London was held on Boxing Day 1838 on Brandon Hill.⁴⁴ And a month later, in January 1839, the parallel was completed when Henry Vincent rode into Bristol on a white horse *à la Hunt* to the plaudits, it was claimed, of ten thousand supporters.⁴⁵ The difference was that Vincent was not a gentleman but a journeyman printer. Likewise, as was widely commented on at the time, when the Chartists wished to hold a meeting for the formal adoption of the Charter itself in June 1838, for the first time the Mayor allowed the working classes the use of the Guildhall, and Mr McKay, 'a working man', presided.⁴⁶ Further evidence of this emergent independent working class political activity was the launching of unstamped, ultra-radical periodicals, *The Reporter* and *The Retaliator*. Surviving copies are rare, but sufficient to show that the former ran at least from 1 September 1832 until 4 May 1833, quite a respectable time for a provincial unstamped paper.⁴⁷ These publications were the work of small printers, booksellers and newsagents such as John Chappell of Hotwells Road and J.G. Powell Jr. who were accustomed to distributing the London unstamped ultra-radical press, even if it meant going to prison for doing so⁴⁸, and who were also active in

⁴³ *Bristol Mercury*, 28 October 1837.

⁴⁴ *The London Dispatch*, 6 January 1839; *Bristol Mercury*, December 29 1838. Speakers included Feargus O'Connor, John Frost and Henry Vincent.

⁴⁵ *The Charter*, 3 February 1839.

⁴⁶ Lovett MSS Birmingham Reference Library vol. 1 f. 271; *Bristol Mercury*, 16 June 1838.

⁴⁷ A.P. Hart, *op. cit.* provides details of *The Reporter*.

⁴⁸ *Bristol Mirror* 30 June 1832; *Bristol Gazette* 4 July 1832; *Bristol Mercury* 30 June 1832 for Powell's imprisonment. He was a leading figure in the Bristol NUWC and, with Frederick Jones, led a splinter group which left the middle class Political Union believing the Reform Bill insufficiently radical. For Chappell's imprisonment, see Parl. Papers XLI (1836): *Return of Persons Committed by Magistrates for the Sale of unstamped Publications*, and for examples of advertisements by him concerning his stock, see *The Destructive and Poor Man's Conservative*, 17 August 1833; *The Operative*, 9 December 1838; *The Western Vindicator*, 23 February 1839. He seconded the motion for adopting the Charter at the Guildhall meeting in 1838.

political organizations. John Chappell, for instance, was a leading figure in the Bristol branch of the National Union of the Working Classes and, later, first treasurer of the Bristol Working Men's Association.

The flowering, ephemeral though it was, of Owenism in Bristol was additional evidence that artisans were becoming more active in Radical causes in the early Victorian age. Possibly as early as 1830, and certainly by 1834, a body of Owenites existed in the city, for in that year Henry Fisher wrote to Robert Owen saying that 'a number of the industrious class had formed an Association for the purpose of acquiring a knowledge of human nature and of the present state of Society and a knowledge of the New State of Society.' They had, he said, fitted up a large room for lectures every Sunday at which forty or fifty attended. They had formed 'a vocal and instrumental band' and were arranging to have the Social Hymns set to music. All that was needed to complete their bliss, he added, was a regular supply of Owen's periodical *The New Moral World*.⁴⁹ By 1837 the well-known Owenite, Alexander Campbell, attracted 7-800 to lectures he gave in the city, and so promising did the Owenite Annual Conference of 1840 consider Bristol to be as a mission field that a Social Missionary was appointed to it. In the same year, too, a substantial Hall of Science, said to be capable of holding 3,000, was erected, and Owen himself was prevailed upon to perform the opening ceremony on 20 December 1840. A rare indication of what drew the rank and file is provided by a letter from a young Bristolian, J.B. Austin, to Owen offering to be his 'humble attendant' when he visited the 'far west.' Austin had been orphaned at nine, and at nineteen he saw himself as condemned for life to working 15-16 hours a day at 'the tedious and laborious' job of druggist's assistant. The trade was overstocked with apprentices, since parents considered it a respectable berth for their sons, and capital, which he lacked, was needed to establish himself as a druggist. He was rescued from despair first by coming across and reading the phrenologist George Combe's *Constitution of Man*, and secondly by meeting 'a young man of high intellectual capacities' who expounded to him both Chartist beliefs and the principles of Socialism.⁵⁰

As is well known, these principles were anathema to Anglican bishops and parsons and to nonconformist ministers who were convinced that Owenism was the enemy of religion and morality and especially of the institution of marriage. By 1840, as the history of Bristol Owenism shows with its lack of interest in co-operative projects or community buildings, Owenism, which had once offered a challenge to the economic theory and practice of early

⁴⁹ *Robert Owen MSS*, Holyoake House, Manchester, A. Fisher to Owen 12 February 1834.

⁵⁰ *ibid.* James Battle Austin, Candidate no. 40 Branch 5, Social Institution, 5 Thomas St, Street to Owen 15 July 1839.

capitalism, was rapidly becoming simply another unorthodox religious sect. This did not deter its enemies. The high Tory *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, barely able in 1839 to bring itself to notice 'this disgusting subject', denounced the Owenites as 'atheistical and blasphemous'⁵¹, and the Rev. John Brindley, who trailed Owen round England engaging that amicable bore in acrimonious debate, in a pamphlet entitled *The immoralities of Socialism* described it as 'the filthiest and most unnatural scheme ever set on foot to corrupt mankind.'⁵² Owen's visit to Bristol in Christmas week 1840 was the occasion for a ferocious and celebrated onslaught, both verbal and, on occasion, physical by Brindley and his Bristol supporters on the Owenites, who undoubtedly came off worst.⁵³ Lloyd Jones, one of Owen's leading disciples who followed up the Social Father's visit, was lucky to escape severe manhandling by a mob instigated, it would seem, by Brindley.⁵⁴

The Owenites survived the enemy's assault and were still quite a force when Charles Southwell took over as Social Missionary in 1841.⁵⁵ By originating the atheist mission to the English working classes, which was to be carried on for two generations by the Holyoakes and Bradlaugh,⁵⁶ Southwell was to justify the very worst that could be said of the Owenites by their critics, and he irretrievably divided and weakened the local branch. An aggressive self-taught intellectual with a chequered career as apprentice piano-maker, seller of the unstamped press, soldier in the British Legion in Spain and failed-actor, Southwell refused to accept Owen's prohibition of theological discussion in Halls of Science. To vindicate the right of free speech, and, no doubt, to shock the clerics of Bristol, he produced with the help of John Field an engraver and William Chilton, a remarkably learned compositor who worked on the *Bristol Mercury*, the first avowedly atheist periodical to appear in Britain, entitled *The Oracle of Reason*. Priced 1d, it claimed to sell thousands a week. It did not mince words, dismissing the Bible as 'that revoltingly odious Jew production which has been for ages the

⁵¹ *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 28 December 1839.

⁵² J. Brindley, *The Immoralities of Socialism*, (1840).

⁵³ *Public discussions between J.B. and R.O. on the questions, What is socialism? and, What would be its practical effects upon society? held in the amphitheatre, Bristol on January 5th, 6th and 7th 1841* (Birmingham, 1841). The Bristol press and Owen's journal *The New Moral World* record the contest in detail. See also F. Podmore, *Robert Owen*, (1906), pp. 511-521.

⁵⁴ Lloyd Jones, *Life, Times and Labour of Robert Owen*, (1889), pp. 368 ff. There is no specific study of Bristol Owenism among the vast literature which the general subject has attracted (for bibliography, see J.F.C. Harrison, *Robert Owen and the Owenites in Britain and America*, 1969) except an undergraduate B.A. thesis of the University of Bristol by Susan Robertson, *Owenites and infidels in early Victorian Bristol* (1975) which understandably has its limitations.

⁵⁵ *The New Moral World*, 24 July 1841. Such biographical detail as survives of Charles Southwell is to be found in *The Secular Chronicle*, 28 October 1877, and *The National Reformer*, 12 January 1861.

⁵⁶ For this see F.B. Smith, *The Atheist mission, 1840-1900*, in R. Robson, ed. *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain* (1967), pp. 205-236, and E. Royle *Victorian Infidels* (1974), chap. 2.

idol of all sorts of blockheads, the glory of knaves and the disgust of wise men.' Not surprisingly prosecution for blasphemy followed at Epiphany Sessions 1842, with crusty old Sir Charles Wetherall, the high-Tory Recorder of Riot days fame, presiding. Conviction was as inevitable as that Southwell should exhaust the jury with a ten-hour defence speech. The trial was a landmark in the history of Victorian infidelity. A martyr had been made, as the rallying of freethinkers from London to his defence showed. They were on hand to pass him copies of the relevant rationalist classics with passages duly marked, which Southwell declaimed in his best Shakespearean manner.⁵⁷ As for Bristol, what the rolling stone Southwell left behind after prison was an Owenite branch which had petered out by 1848; William Chilton who, until his death in 1855, continued to make erudite contributions to the chief freethinkers' journal, *The Reasoner*⁵⁸; and those seeds of rationalism which probably explains why from 1866 to the end of the century Bristol was never without a secularist following, however small.⁵⁹

This independent working class ultra-Radicalism was not a powerful force in early-Victorian Bristol. There is no evidence of mass support for the Bristol branch of the National Union of the Working Classes, and I see no reason to question Professor Cannon's assessment that support for Chartism in the city was tepid and the movement much divided. On the other hand, in the early thirties there was genuinely widespread enthusiasm for reforms which were less far-reaching than those demanded by ultra-Radicals but which seemed quite Radical and subversive to Tories and to the more timid and conservative among the Whigs. The extremely virulent contest at the general election of 1830 suggests this. The battle was entirely fought within the Whig ranks. Edward Protheroe, flying the flag of abolition of slavery, likening the condition of Bristol's freemen under the rule of the Tory and conservative Whig West India interests to that of the enslaved negro, and advocating reform of parliament, a cheap loaf, abolition of pensions and sinecures, and so on, picked up 2,843 votes, running Baillie, the conservative West India interest Whig, with his 3,378, pretty close. In part this was because Protheroe was backed by Quaker money and support from both

⁵⁷ Reports of the trial are in *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, 22 January 1842; *Bristol Gazette*, 20 January 1842; *Bristol Mercury*, 15, 22 January 1842, and *Bristol Mirror*, 22 January 1842. This last refused to print Southwell's defence because it meant giving currency to his heinous errors. See also *The Trial of Charles Southwell for Blasphemy*. . . . (specially reported by William Carpenter and published by Hetherington) London 1842. Southwell was given the stiff sentence of a year in gaol and a fine of £100. Holyoake believed James Wood, the Methodist of Bristol, was the instigator of the prosecution (*The Movement* i. no. 55, 1844).

⁵⁸ William Chilton (1815-1855) helped with editing *The Oracle of Reason* while Southwell was in prison, contributed to *The Movement* (e.g. nos 56 and 58), and *The Reasoner* (e.g. nos 35, 41, 141), was secretary of the Bristol branch of the Owenites for a while in 1840 and sympathetic to the Chartists. There is an obituary in *Bristol Mirror* 2 June 1855.

⁵⁹ See E. Royle, *Radicals, Secularists and Republicans* Manchester, (1980), p. 52.

within Bristol and from radically-minded Quakers outside the city, such as Joseph Sturge of Birmingham. By contrast, James Acland, standing on a more Radical platform than Protheroe, attracted but a handful of votes.⁶⁰

But the most striking example of the backing for moderate reform that could be aroused in the early thirties was the popular support which the Bristol Political Union was able to mobilize for the Reform bill of 1831. The Political Union was hardly a respectable body. Its leading spirit was a Professor, William Herapath, from the Bristol Medical School. Its rules prescribed that two-thirds of its council should be operative mechanics, and it was born at a mass meeting in Queen Square on 26 April 1831. Its secretary described it as 'too revolutionary' for the professional and businessmen of the Whig Reform Committee which had been set up to organize decorous meetings and petitions in favour of the bill. At the mass meeting in Queen Square, two candidates pledged to support the bill were nominated for the forthcoming general election of 1831. Soon, many trade societies declared their support for them, and such was the popular enthusiasm for reform that the Tories did not even dare put up their man for the election. Both the pledged candidates were returned. The substantial support which the Political Union could rally was again demonstrated by the mass meeting it called to protest against the rejection of the Reform bill by the House of Lords, and even more impressively by the role it played during the Riots of October 1831. The city establishment was forced to rely on it to restore law and order.⁶¹

Nevertheless, although hostility to the Corn Law⁶² was a reasonably popular cause in the city, Bristol was scarcely a stronghold of the aggressive anti-aristocratic middle class Radicalism associated with the names of Cobden, Bright or Joseph Sturge, or, later in the century, of Joseph Chamberlain and Sir Charles Dilke. Joseph Sturge's Complete Suffrage Union did not gather much support in the city.⁶³ Nor was the Radical Professor Herapath and his confederate Harman Visgar able to make any impact on the City Council to which they were elected after its reform in 1835.⁶⁴ Again, somewhat surprisingly, considering the strength of Noncon-

⁶⁰ For this election, see P. Marshall, *Bristol and the abolition of Slavery* (Bristol, 1975).

⁶¹ All the five principal newspapers published in Bristol at the time and the numerous pamphleteers who gave accounts of the Riots of 1831 make considerable reference to the Political Union. Francis Place in Add. MS 27790 gave some account of it based on information he received from its secretary. The best available modern account is A.P. Hart, *op. cit.* pp. 46-54.

⁶² The Bristol Anti-Corn Law Association was formed in March 1839. The Liberal M.P. Henry Berkeley, who had declared for total repeal in 1838, presented numerous petitions to parliament on its behalf. Cobden and Bright drew an audience of 5,000 in June 1841, and Bright spoke in Bristol in March and August 1842. Both leaders of the League included the city in their final tour of the country to whip up support late in 1845. The Quaker George Thomas was the leading local figure in the Association.

⁶³ J.A. Cannon, *The Chartists in Bristol*, pp. 11-12.

⁶⁴ G.W.A. Bush, *Bristol and its municipal government 1820-1851*, p. 149.

formity in the city, Edward Miall's Radical Dissent, with its constant attacks on 'the state church', attracted little support. In 1847 Miall's friend Apsley Pellat contested the Bristol seat, but the Radical Dissenters, supported by the Chartists, only managed to rustle up 171 votes.⁶⁵

Why was this so? First, the strength of the Tories in Bristol must be emphasised. They soon recovered from the debacle of 1831. Indeed, they surpassed themselves in 1832 by capturing both parliamentary seats. Moreover, the reforms of the early thirties which they had resisted so stubbornly were more limited in their effects than at first appeared. Very generous financial compensation, against which Radicals protested, reconciled the West India interest to the abolition of slavery.⁶⁶ The blow of municipal reform was softened by the gerrymandering of ward representation, giving Tory strongholds such as Clifton undue representation, and by the existence of the aldermanic bench⁶⁷ and an electorate which was decidedly smaller and more select than that for choosing the city's M.Ps. Above all, the Bristol Tories were extremely efficient organizers of their own supporters in the municipal electorate. The Liberals proved to be more effective at registering their parliamentary voters, but the Tories usually had the edge when it came to municipal voters. Very recently, an example of Tory thoroughness has come to light. At the very first municipal election, held on Boxing Day 1835, the Tory Ward Committees went to the length of producing printed voting papers listing the candidates with a tear off sheet of instructions. The already-canvassed elector's name and his address as it appeared on the Burgess Roll was pencilled in on the voting paper. All the elector had to do was strike out the names of the Liberal or Radical candidates and ink in the pencilled details of his name and address. He was also instructed carefully as to the answers he should give to questions he might be asked at the Polling Booth.⁶⁸ Short of actually steering his pen and speaking for him, there seems little more the Tory election experts could have done to get out their vote.

Secondly, given that Radicals were usually driven by a sense of outrage against privilege, waste and abuse of power, particularly by the aristocracy, there was increasingly little reason after 1850 for Bristol's middle class, whether church or chapel-goers, to be outraged. Although we have been quite properly warned against taking a very rosy view of Bristol's economic

⁶⁵ *Bristol Mercury*, 31 July 1847, and for Pellatt, who was a Southwark glass manufacturer, see M. Stenton, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament*, Hassocks (1976), i. 306.

⁶⁶ P. Marshall, *op. cit.* and see note 2 for an ultra-radical protest.

⁶⁷ G.W.A. Bush, *op. cit.* chap. viii.

⁶⁸ I owe this to Mr. Alex Wilson by whose initiative some interesting materials about municipal and parliamentary elections in the parish of All Saints, Bristol were rescued from destruction.

growth in the sixties, seventies and eighties,⁶⁹ there can be no doubt that her middle class did enjoy a growth in numbers and prosperity. More fortunes were made, especially in the newer consumer goods industries, and the pickings for professional men grew greater. Middle class suburbs such as northern Clifton, Redland and Cotham burgeoned. Aristocracy was conspicuous by its absence. The chief ground landlord in Bristol was not a great aristocrat, as in so many cities, but the Merchant Venturers. In effect, the Bristol middle classes ran their own city, and when Liberal Nonconformist manufacturers penetrated the City Council in the late sixties and early seventies, they were more concerned with a possible threat from below than misgovernment from above. Hence their energetic attempt, as some would say, to civilize, or, as others would say, to control the working classes through provision for culture and recreation, which Dr. Meller has usefully analysed.⁷⁰

Thirdly and lastly, the Bristol Liberals became adept at containing possible sources of Radical discontent. The career of Henry Berkeley, Liberal member for Bristol from 1837 until his death at the age of 75 in 1870, illustrates this. His programme, in effect, was always neatly tailored to give him a progressive image sufficient to make him acceptable to radically inclined members of both the trade societies and the chapels without committing him to any truly Radical course. Without doubt his tactics were successful with the 35%-40% of Bristol's adult males who enjoyed the parliamentary vote in the years between the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867. He pushed his share of the poll up from 31.5% in 1837 to 45.5% in 1847 and became virtually unchallengeable as the senior Liberal candidate. The only question remaining was whether persistent division within the Conservative ranks might enable the Liberals to win both seats. And if so, would this be with a truly Radical candidate running with Berkeley.⁷¹ The answer came in 1852 when both seats were indeed captured by the Liberals — as was to remain the case down to 1885 — but Berkeley's running mate, W.H. Gore-Langton, far from being a Radical, was if anything less inclined in that direction than Berkeley himself.

However, there were signs in the mid-Victorian political scene in Bristol that the mild reformism of Henry Berkeley would not always be acceptable. New influences were beginning to permeate the working class supporters of

⁶⁹ B.W.E. Alford, 'The economic development of Bristol in the nineteenth century: an enigma?' in P. McGrath and J. Cannon (eds.), *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History*, Bristol, 1976.

⁷⁰ H. Meller, *Leisure and the changing city* (1976). For the alternative view and a critical exploration of how 'hegemony' worked in practice, see S. Humphries, 'Hurrah for England: schooling and the working class, in Bristol, 1870-1914' in J. Lowerson (ed.), *Southern History* (1979) pp. 171-209.

⁷¹ For Berkeley, see R.G. Mackenzie, *The parliamentary representation of Bristol, 1837-1859 and the career of Henry Berkeley* (unpublished M. Litt. thesis, Bristol, 1975).

the Liberal party in the sixties which found expression when Berkeley's death in 1870 precipitated a bye-election. The Executive Committee of the Liberal Association chose a Director of the Bank of England as the new candidate, rejecting the local contender, Elisha Robinson, of the well known paper-making family, only to be confronted with the unprecedented demand from the Operatives' Liberal Association that a working class candidate should be adopted. Elisha Robinson refused to step down and the only way the Liberal Association could find of resolving the problem was to hold a test ballot of the electorate to decide who should be the candidate. John Causey, Bristol's leading trade unionist of the time, chaired an excitable meeting in the Broadmead Rooms (formerly the Owenite Hall of Science), which approved the candidature of George Odger, a nationally-known trade unionist. He campaigned with vigour in Bristol and although Robinson topped the poll with 4,502 votes, the banker came second with 2,861. Odger polled a respectable 1,385.⁷²

This, as well as other signs of increased working class activity in the early seventies, such as the successful launching of the Trades Council in 1873 and its President's narrow failure to win a seat on the newly-elected School Board in the following years, were signs, admittedly small, that sooner or later the established parties would find themselves challenged by what for those times was the Radical demand for direct representation of 'labour' on local and national bodies. And, indeed, Bristol was early in the field in forming an organization for this purpose in 1886. One reason for this was that the city was also early in the field in having a Socialist Society in 1884. Its members were active, along with the Trades Council on which some of the Socialists such as John Gregory, the shoemaker poet of Clifton College sat, in promoting the Labour League of 1886.

To be early in the field was no guarantee of success, and the process by which a new party emerged was slow and laborious. Before 1900 not a lot had been achieved in the field of labour representation, in spite of the great labour revolt of 1889 when strike followed strike and Socialists such as the Rev. H.H. Gore became for the moment popular heroes. Certainly, the revolt led to considerable increase in trade union membership in the nineties, although the leadership of its co-ordinating body still remained firmly in the hands of the older craft unions rather than the new unions of the semi-skilled and unskilled, who were hard-pressed by the employers' counter-offensive.⁷³ Nor should one think that those who called themselves

⁷² *Western Daily Press* 24 February to 24 March 1870.

⁷³ For more detail on the topics touched on in these two paragraphs see D. Large and R. Whitfield, *The Bristol Trades Council 1873-1973* (Bristol, 1973) and B.J. Atkinson, *The Bristol Labour movement, 1868-1906* (unpublished D. Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1969).

RADICALISM IN BRISTOL IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Socialists in the eighties and nineties, whether working men such as Frank Sheppard or committed Christians such as the Stacys, Girdlestone or H.H. Gore,⁷⁴ would easily be recognised by those who claim the title today. Karl Marx meant little or nothing to them. They were in many ways the heirs to this fitful Radical strain in Bristol's affairs rather than the fathers of twentieth-century socialism.

⁷⁴ For Bristol's Christian Socialists, see P. d'A Jones, *The Christian Socialist revival 1877-1914* (Princeton, 1968) pp. 5, 297, 311-2, 386 and S. Bryher's delightful *An account of the Labour and Socialist movement in Bristol*, (Bristol 1929).

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